THE LOST WANTSUM CHANNEL
ITS IMPORTANCE TO RICHBOROUGH CASTLE

By Geo. P. Walker.

The interesting excavations carried out by the Society of Antiquaries at Richborough Castle have increasingly tended to demonstrate the peculiar importance of that place to the Romans.

The whole island was apparently built upon, and included Palaces, Temples, Baths, Mint and Amphitheatre. It had even two main roads radiating from it, one, the Watling Street (the first road the Romans ever built in this country) going through Canterbury on its way to London, and the other to Dover and Lympne. They crossed over the tidal waters from the Castle by means of a causeway, the remains of which can still be seen near Fleet Farm. The harbour was in the north-west of the island, where one of their docks, as viewed to-day, confirms the importance which this naval base had for the Romans; and if further evidence were needed, the fact that the total finds in coins up to date now exceeds the enormous number of 150,000 would in itself be sufficient.

Now what was there about this site that gave it such importance as this, an importance so great that the Castle became the focus of the maritime traffic and the chief port from which the agricultural and mineral products of the country were exported?

The explanation is undoubtedly to be found in the fact of its having been built on an island situated in a land-locked harbour of the now dried-up Wantsum Channel.

But even with this circumstance as a guide it is difficult for the visitor of to-day to visualise it, as all that remains to be seen is an isolated, weatherbeaten old Castle on the top

of a hill, far from the sea and entirely surrounded by marshes.

But these very marshes were once the bed of an inland sea, known to the Romans as the "Portus Rutupis," and by the Saxons the "Wantsum Channel," whose waters gave the necessary facility for bringing Richborough Castle up to that high state of importance to which it attained during the occupation of this country by the Romans (see Map).

Though known for centuries by name only, historically the Wantsum Channel was one of the most interesting Straits in Great Britain, for over its waters came men who not only contributed to change the race, but also the very religion of the people.

To the many who visit Margate and Ramsgate in the summer the term "Isle of Thanet" has no more significance than that of a postal address, or that the name is derived from a small stream separating it from Kent. But in reality the term in the past had a real significance, for the water that divided Thanet from Kent was, in places, some miles wide, and a regular shipping trade was not only carried on between London and the different ports of its shores, but also a channel service was run between it and the Continent.

It had two entrances, one on the North Kent Coast (see map) called the Northmouth, where stands the Roman fortress Regulbium now called "The Reculver." It was built on the edge of a cliff, where, from its position, it completely dominated the estuary. A road which is still in existence connected it up with Canterbury (see map 2). The other entrance was in Pegwell Bay. But from its youth onwards the effect of the double entrances was bound eventually to prove fatal to its existence, for they reduced the energy of the tides, both flood and ebb, as a scouring medium against silt; also there was always the damage being done by the drainage from its four rivers. This silting process must have continued for centuries till at last a time arrived in which nothing was left but the barren marshes that we see to-day.

From the Reculver its direction was due South until

it reached the village of Sarre on the Thanet side and Chislet on the main land (see map). Here it was about a mile wide. From this point it turned off in an easterly direction for the remainder of its course, widening to seven miles between the cliffs of Ramsgate and Deal. Two arms stretched out, one going in the direction of Bridge, the little Stour, and the other, the great Stour, to Canterbury (see map).

About a mile and a half from the Pegwell Bay entrance stood an island now called Richborough (see map); it was here the Roman General, Aulus Pautius, landed with 50,000 troops on his invasion of Britain in A.D. 43. He was guided, no doubt, to this spot by information gathered from records left by Julius Cæsar, who was here about ninety years before (B.C. 54).

It was a well-chosen spot, as it lay inside the Channel, close to the Kent shore, and stood high above the surrounding sea. It was protected from the ocean by a natural breakwater called the Stonar Beach (see map) which, with its root at Ebbsfleet, continued southwards for about two and a half miles, finishing close to where Sandwich stands to-day; although in Roman times the latter place had not come into existence. It was round the southern end of this breakwater that the eastern entrance to the Channel was situated (see map). On it was built the town of Stonar, which was finally destroyed by the French in 1385. Its site is easily picked out from the Ramsgate road. Stonar came into prominence during the late Roman period. It replaced Richborough as a port after the latter had become silted up. Why the town ever became so important as it did is a mystery, but that such was the case is well authenticated by a number of ancient writers; for, having been built on the Stonar Beach, it was in Thanet, and consequently cut off from Kent by the Wantsum Channel, so that goods and passengers coming from the Continent would have to make use of the Ferry to reach the Mainland. There can be little doubt it was at Stonar that St. Augustine landed in A.D. 597, afterwards waiting at Ebbsfleet, which is at the Northern end, for King Ethelbert's permission to proceed to Canterbury

to start his mission. The spot where the King met him is near by, and has been commemorated by a stone cross erected by the late Lord Granville. Ebbsfleet is also famous as the landing place of Hengest and his Saxon followers in A.D. 449, who were destined to change the entire history of this country for six hundred years, their end being brought about by William the Norman at the battle of Hastings in 1066.

It is a far cry from Roman times to the present, but it is well to try to bridge the centuries that have passed, and to wander over the ground, picking up the threads of this old story where possible.

From the N. wall of Richborough Castle the valley of the Wantsum is seen as far as Pegwell Bay on the right, and to the village of Sarre on the left, the low range of hills in the middle distance representing the southern shore of the Isle of Thanet, with Minster Church lying at its feet (see map).

On the rising ground in Thanet above Minster a very fine view can be had of the Channel. The outlook is now south and the old Kent shore is quite discernible with Richborough Castle on the high ground; to the left is Sandwich, with the sea in the extreme distance, while through the marshes flows the Stour river threading its way into Pegwell Bay (see map).

Standing on the cliff at the Reculver, and looking east towards Margate, the double wall that closed up what was called the Northmouth of the Channel can be seen. It begins at our feet and reaches away towards Birchington. The Thames is on one side, while on the other is the valley of the Wantsum (see map).

But perhaps the best view of all can be had from Hilborough Church, which is about one mile south-west from the Reculver and is situated on the Kent side. On a clear day the valley of the Wantsum can be seen for miles in either direction, as the Church, standing on the very edge of the high ground, commands a view of the whole landscape. Everywhere in the foreground are the marshes, and to the

left the Reculver, still keeping watch and guard on the coast. In the middle distance is the rising ground of the Isle of Thanet, with St. Nicholas' Church on the slope, while to the left are the few houses that comprise the village of Bartletts. On the extreme right is an avenue of trees reaching from Kent into Thanet. They mark the line of the main Canterbury-Margate road, which crosses the marshes on what is called Sarre Wall. Here the Channel was at its narrowest; and here the historic Sarre Ferry, mentioned by the Venerable Bede, carried its passengers to and from the island.

As the visitor approaches Sarre, coming from Canterbury, it will be noticed that this road strikes the village at right angles and, until a house was pulled down recently, had to make a sharp detour to get round it. This curious twist in the road brings back to memory the time when Sarre was a port with a harbour and a sea front, whose houses would face the beach; the approach road, now crossing over the Sarre wall, taking the place of the Ferry.

"To the right the white curves of Ramsgate Cliffs looking down on the crescent of Pegwell Bay; far away to the left across the gray marsh levels, where the smoke wreaths mark the sites of Richborough and Sandwich, the coast line bends dimly to the fresh rise of the cliffs beyond Deal. Everything in the character of the ground confirms the national tradition which fixed here the first landing place of our English fathers; for, great as the physical changes of the country have been since the fifth century, they have told little on its main features. It is easy to discover, in the misty level of the present Minster marsh, what was once a broad inlet of the sea, parting Thanet from the mainland, through which the pirate boats of the first Englishmen came sailing with a fair wind to the little gravel spit of Ebbsfleet; and Richborough, a fortress whose broken ramparts still rise above the gray flats which have taken the place of the older sea channel, was the common landing place of travellers from Gaul."[1]

[1] Green's *History of the English People.*

PRE-HISTORIC PERIOD.

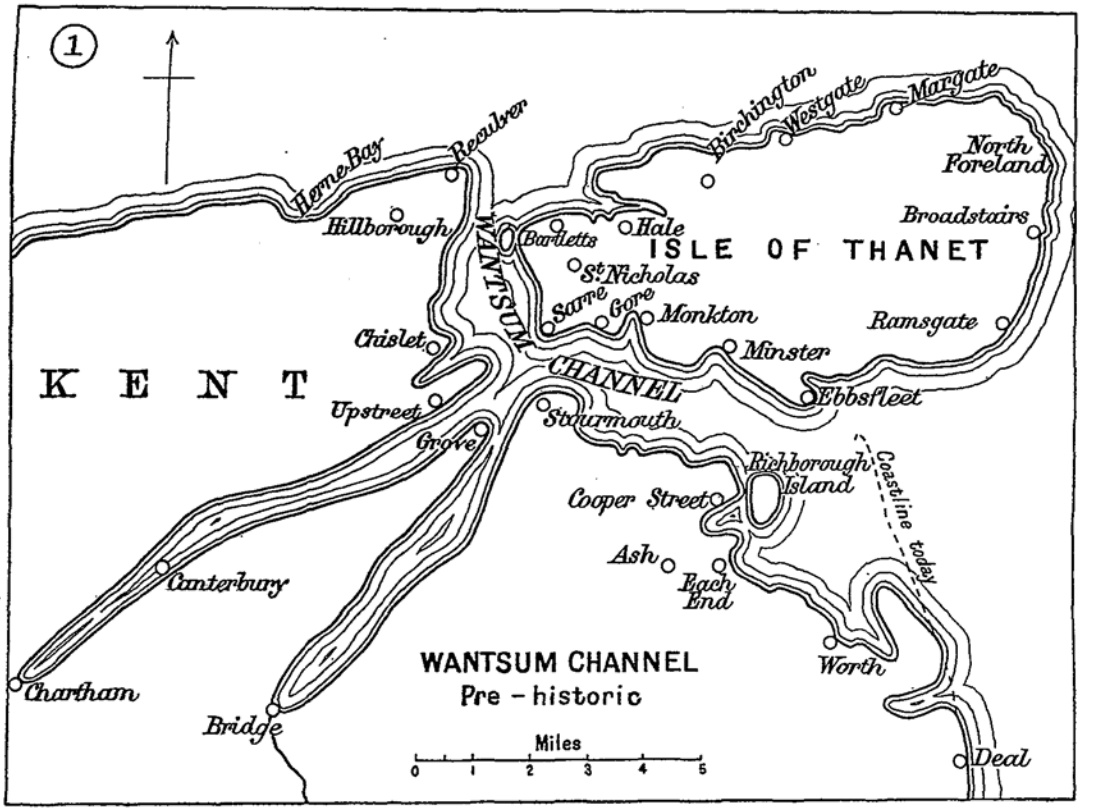
Not much can be said of the Channel in pre-historic days, but a glance at the accompanying map (see map 1), will give some idea of its extent and ramifications, thanks to the courtesy of the Geological Institute, from whose map the sketch was made.

Of the Pegwell Bay entrance, Mr. John Lewis, a well-known antiquary of the eighteenth century, says :

" That the estuary, in which was included the harbour of Richborough, known to the Romans as ' Portus Rutupis,' had extended from the Cliffs of Ramsgate southward to Walmer (a distance of eight miles), and indeed the whole of the low ground between Sandwich and Deal, washing the shore of an Island on which stands Richborough Castle."

From this eight mile stretch of open sea (the Stonar Beach not then having been formed) the Channel rapidly contracted in its westerly course to a width of about one and a half mile opposite Sarre on the Thanet coast and Chislet in Kent. At this point the direction was changed to that of North, when the width again expanded to about four miles at Reculver. The two arms at this period reached, in one instance, as far as Chartham, passing on its way part of the site where Canterbury now stands, while the other travelled in a more southerly direction to Bridge.

The *Victoria County History of Kent* says : " One of the most interesting facts connected with the marine animals in the neighbourhood of Sandwich is the evidence furnished by the Mollusca of the great changes known to have occurred. It is found in its living state only some way below Sandwich, but dead shells in good preservation, in the position they had when living, are found in the mud of the Great Stour near Stourmouth, where they no doubt lived when there was an open Channel round by Reculver." The position, where the dead shells are found, is about half way into the estuary, and is proof of the free access of sea water through the Channel.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Herne Bay
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Barletts
Hale
Birchington
Westgate
Margate
North Foreland
Broadstairs
ISLE OF THANET
St. Nicholas
Sarre
Gore
Monkton
Ramsgate
Minster
Chislet
KENT
CHANNEL
Ebbsfleet
Upstreet
Sturmouth
Grove
Richborough
Island
Coastline today
Cooper Street
Ash
Each End
Canterbury
Chartham
Bridge
WANTSUM CHANNEL
Pre - historic
Worth
Deal
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By comparing the Geological map (map 1) with a modern one of the same scale, a reason will at once be found for the position of many of the villages in this district. Villages such as Worth, Monkton, Fordwich, St. Nicholas and Hale, which, to the casual observer, seem never to have had any connection with the sea, will be found to have been built on what was once a creek or arm of the Channel.

Another fact worth noting is the irregularity of the Deal coast, compared with its present straight line, and also the manner in which it receded in a westerly direction; the whole distance from Deal to Stourmouth being a mass of little bays and creeks, with the Island of Richborough standing clear of the coast in a most conspicuous manner. It would appear, therefore, that the full extent of the Wantsum Channel was at one time from the Ramsgate cliffs to Walmer, on the east coast, and from Reculver to Birchington on the north, with two arms at about its centre, running south-west and south.

Though we have no records until the arrival of the Romans, it may fairly be assumed that the early inhabitants would make use of a sheet of water like this for trade and fishing; and might not the Phœnicians, in their periodical visits to this island, have sailed over its surface and even penetrated as far as Canterbury?

The following extracts have been written as an index to the extent of the channel, which, though it had as a basis the rivers Stour and Wantsum, would have made a very valuable adjunct to the waterways of our island, had it existed to-day.

"There can be little doubt that the Rutupine coast was the scene of many important events, which, unrecorded by the pen of history, must be presumed to have occurred." (Roach-Smith.)

"All the villages above the level of the marshes, to the westward of lower Deal, about Sandwich and in Thanet, are continually furnishing British, Roman and Saxon money." (Boys' *History of Sandwich.*)

"Even to-day, though the ground has been so much raised by repeated depositions of mud, the whole of the Marsh land

between Deal and Thanet would be overflowed by every extraordinary spring tide, were it not for the natural barrier raised by the surge of the sea against itself, and the artificial banks thrown up along the haven of Sandwich." (Boys' *History of Sandwich.*)

"In digging near to the river Stour at Chartham at a depth of 16 feet were found the bones of a Hippopotamus, which helps to prove the existence of the sea reaching up to Chartham through the valley of the Stour." (Somner.)

ROMAN PERIOD A.D. 43-400.

The Wantsum Channel as it was during Roman times (see map 2) must next be considered.

The two raids made by Julius Cæsar in 55 and 54 B.C. are hardly applicable here, though upon his second visit a few of his ships may have just entered one of the creeks at the S.E. corner of the Channel, near where the village of Worth[1] now stands; but what does concern us is the period following the invasion under the Roman General Aulus Plautius, during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, A.D. 43.

Glancing at map 2 it will be observed that there is one outstanding alteration in the Channel from the pre-historic times (see map 1), an alteration so great, that without it, the coming of the Romans would, at least to this corner of England, have been impossible. The difference referred to is, of course, that during the interval of time the Stonar beach has been formed. Mr. George Dowker says:—

"It (the Stonar Beach) shews evidence that it had travelled from north to south or from the Thanet cliffs towards Sandwich; that it was the result of marine currents which flowed at the time it was formed, in exactly opposite direction to the sea currents at the present time, and which for many ages past have driven the Walmer beach from south to north. This change of currents was probably due to the widening of the English Channel between Dover and Calais, so that to go back to the time when the Stonar beach was formed, we must date back to the pre-historic period. Now all the historic evidences we have met with point to the same conclusion, viz., that the Stonar beach and its connection

[1] Worth well deserves the attention of archæologists. It stands on an elevated peninsula at the southern entrance to the Channel, overlooking a sheltered bay, and must have been a tempting spot for an early human settlement.

with the Isle of Thanet date back previous to the Roman occupation of Britain."

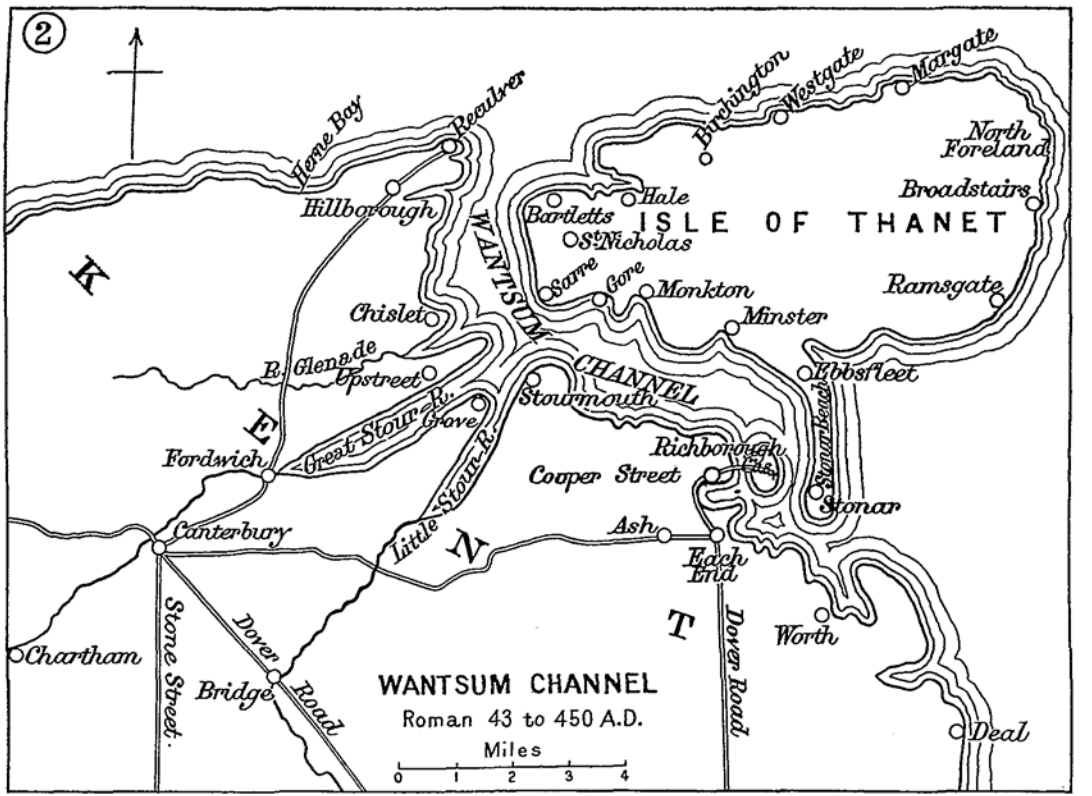
This neck of land, with its base at Ebbsfleet, is about three and a half miles long, composed of beach material, and had been formed by the action of the sea. It takes the form of a breakwater or mole, rendering the eastern entrance, what it had never been before, a safe haven or harbour during all weathers (see map 2). Mr. Geo. E. Fox, in his history of Richborough Castle, says :

" It (Richborough) was not washed by the open sea, though a broad channel may have flowed close beside it, forming one of the southern mouths of the strait, while a narrow strip of salt marsh and sand bank lay between it and the open sea."

Mr. R. Holmes, in his book, *The Landing Place of Julius Cæsar*, writes :

" The island (Richborough) on its eastern side was separated by a channel from the Stonar Beach, the southern extremity of which lay east by north of the site of Sandwich."

This latter place at the time of the Roman landing was not in existence, and we do not hear of it for another six hundred years later ; but it is doubtful whether, at this period, even the sandbank upon which it was afterwards founded, had risen above the sea. The main entrance, therefore, would be round the southern end of the Stonar Beach, inside of which a safe anchorage could at once be found. The other alteration noticeable is on the most northerly of the two arms, which originally stretched as far as Chartham. It had now receded so much that Canterbury was left dry with the exception of the river Stour, divided into two branches, running through it. This is conclusively proved, as we find that the Romans, in building their great road from Dover to London, carried it over the Stour in passing through Canterbury. It entered the city by the Riding gate and can be traced there to-day under the names of Watling Street and Beer Cart Lane, which runs to the west, and parallel to, St. Peter Street. From this period, therefore, Canterbury can no longer be said to have had direct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WANTSUM CHANNEL
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access to the Wantsum Channel, and it had to make use of Fordwich, a village about two miles to the N.E., as its Port.

Whether the shrinking of this arm was nature's work, or whether the Romans themselves dammed the water back to facilitate the making of the road, cannot, after the lapse of so many years, be certain, but the evidence of the Watling Street is too clear to be ignored, and the assumption is, that if the sea during this period reached Canterbury, it did not pass through it as in pre-historic days.

This, then, was the appearance of the Wantsum Channel during the Roman period, so far as can be gathered. It is in no way hypothetical, but a picture drawn from evidence that any student may gather for himself, either from written records, traditions, or the clear indications found in the district.

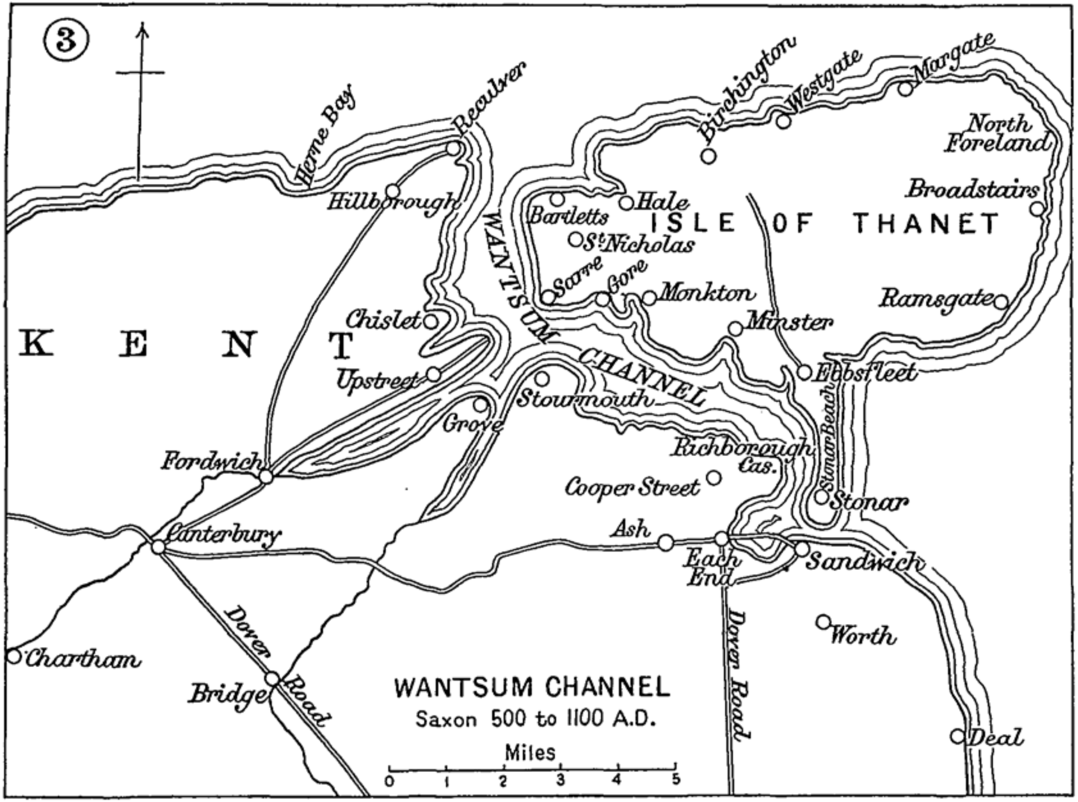
William Boys, the historian of Sandwich, says :

"The extensive tract of marsh land lying between Thanet and Walmer, and extending from the shore to Canterbury, was formerly the bed of the Portus Rutupinus, and was in all probability covered by the sea at the time the Romans were in this country. A strong presumptive proof of this is that no remains whatever of that people occur anywhere throughout this flat district; whereas we meet with coins and other Roman matter the moment we ascend the rising borders of the marsh."

SAXON PERIOD 450 TO 1100 A.D.

We have now arrived at a date which can be designated "The Saxon Period," that is between the sixth century and the coming of the Normans in the eleventh century A.D. The Romans had gone, and a new race of people had taken over the reins of government, and great alterations had, in the meantime, taken place in the physical formation of the Wantsum Channel, so that a fresh survey of it will not be out of place. Map 3 shows at once, especially at the east or Deal coast entrance, what these alterations were.

During the Roman period the entrance had been from the southern end of the Stonar Beach to Deal. The wind,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Grove
Richborough Cas.
Stonar Beach
Fordwich
Cooper Street
Stonar
Canterbury
Ash
Each End
Sandwich
Dover Road
Worth
Chartham
Bridge
Deal
WANTSUM CHANNEL
Saxon 500 to 1100 A.D.
Miles
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tide and currents had been continuously at work on this coast, washing the beach northwards with unsparing regularity, and closing up the mouth to such an extent that the entrance was reduced from its larger area to that of one that could be calculated by yards. Immediately to the south of the Stonar Beach a sandbank had been raised, and was now above the sea level, giving the opportunity necessary for a beach formation to settle on the south and south-east of it, assisted, as it always has been, by the northerly drift up the Deal coast. Mr. Geo. Dowker in *Coast Erosions*, says :—

"During the last fifteen years the drifting northward of the sea beaches, formerly protecting the cliffs from St. Margaret's to Walmer, has continued unabated until the beach that formerly protected the cliffs to Kingsdown has been swept away, and carried past the Walmer beach to Deal, though, at that place, the shore line has been nearly stationary until we approach the north end of Deal towards Sandown Castle, where the encroachment of the sea has washed most of the beach away and carried it past the Castle. This north-easterly drift of the beach has not been materially altered by the prevailing winds, though high tides and winds have accelerated the motion of the beach. When they have been from a westerly direction, they have moved it more rapidly northward; while the winds in the opposite direction have retarded its course by throwing the beach to a high level. The total result has been to accumulate beach instead of sand, northward of Deal."

If it is remembered that the original entrance started where Deal is to-day, it will be better understood what a paralyzing effect this northerly drift of beach material had on the life of the Channel.

Another effect of the drift was to leave part of the beach on the outer edge of the sandbank, and to straighten out gradually the line of the coast. This new formation to the south of the Stonar Beach would, of course, make the harbour inside more secure from the open sea, but it also had the disadvantage of greatly restricting it in size, as well as in depth; and most probably, even before their departure, the Romans had given up the use of Richborough as a

port, owing to the silting that had been going on there. The Rev. J. Douglas in *Urbs Rutupiae* says :—

"In A.D. 604 Richborough was no longer the port for Canterbury, being disused or blocked up. It was at a little distance towards the confluence of the estuary and had fallen into decay by the choking up of the channel, and so in turn was finally lost as a port."

In other words, Richborough was a derelict, with all its old glory gone, though still, apparently, inhabited and made use of, for we hear of King Ethelbert building a Palace there and also of a Chapel being erected on the site.

During the sixth century we meet with the earliest mention of a new town, viz.: Stonar. Mr. Geo. Dowker says that *Stonar as a port and town existed at such a remote date that it precludes altogether the notion that it was covered by the waters of the sea during the Roman period.*

It was situated on the lower inner side of the Stonar Beach and rose to considerable importance. The probability is that, as it was situated nearer the estuary, the water was deeper there than at Richborough; and as the latter place became more and more choked up, so Stonar rose in importance. Stonar can, with all apparent reason, be termed a Roman-Saxon town, its first mention being so close on the heels of the departing Romans, as to warrant the suggestion that it existed before they left. In the Sandwich Manuscript there is this passage :—

"The town of Stonar was in great fame in the times of King Ethelbert, about the year of grace 616, at which place Canute and his Danes landed in the haven of Rutupi, and then he entered with all his navy."

A town, as a rule, does not rise to fame in a day, nor need we suppose that Stonar was an exception to this. It was badly damaged by the Danes in the year 990, rebuilt by William the Conqueror in 1069, and finally wiped out by the French in 1385.

Another town came into existence during the period under review (seventh century), viz.: Sandwich. It faced

Stonar across the Channel entrance, and is consequently in Kent, while its vis-à-vis was in Thanet. Of the two towns Stonar was the older, but its age, according to the rule of this doomed channel, seemed, as usual, to be against it. Richborough was the first to be affected by the silting operations, and had to bow its head before Stonar, and so, eventually, the latter place was, in turn, to feel the effect of the receding waters and to give way to Sandwich. The Rev. Canon Scott Robertson identifies Stonar with the ancient Lundenwic, and concludes that it existed centuries before Sandwich was heard of.

The situation of Sandwich, when it was founded, was that of sentinel on the southern shore of the estuary; and it was in a position completely to command the entrance, in a similar manner as Portsmouth does its harbour. What the width of the channel was at this time can, of course, only be assumed, but at as late a date as 1578, there is a harbour order mentioned in the *Sandwich Manuscript* which says that

"No vessels, except such as are loading or unloading, shall lie within 30 feet of the Quays."

To-day the total width does not exceed this. In Edward IV.'s reign, twenty-two ships were supplied to the Navy by Sandwich, and in Boys' *History of Sandwich* there is this passage:—

"In 1052 Godwin and Harold took all the ships they could find in Romney, Hythe and Folkestone. Landing at Sandwich and Dover, they took many prisoners out of both places; then sailing right through Sandwich Harbour and out at Northmouth towards London."

There is another entry in the *Sandwich Manuscripts* under date 1011 A.D. as follows:—

"The Danes came again (to Sandwich) with great army and navy, both because the haven was so commodious, and because it was near Canterbury."

Altogether, from the great importance of the place, as recorded by many historians, there must have been sufficient

room, not only for ships in dock or at anchor, but for the full passage of those sailing through to the Northmouth.

There appear to be no data that can be relied upon to inform us as to any changes in the remaining parts of the Channel. All that can be said is that it was still open, and ships were passing through from end to end during all of the period under review.

The question now arises at what date did the sandbank become sufficiently solid to allow of a town being built upon it. To arrive at this, the evidence must, of course, be largely circumstantial, as no exact information has come down to us from ancient historians, so it will have to be inferred by deduction. Neither the Stonar Beach nor the Sandwich sandbank appears in the Geological maps, but experts agree that the former is the older of the two. The town of Stonar we hear of in the sixth century, less than a hundred years after the departure of the Romans. It was, at that period, in a flourishing condition. Sandwich we hear of for the first time in the seventh century when it, too, was well established. Hasted's *History of Kent* says *that at the time of the landing of St. Augustine, if not covered by the sea, Sandwich must have been a mere island.* Here, then, is the point—for what purpose was Stonar built and made a port of, if the site of Sandwich was available ? The only answer one can conceive, is that the sandbank was not ready, for of the two towns, Sandwich was by far the more convenient, being situated in Kent, and consequently on the mainland. Goods and passengers could go direct, by road, to Canterbury. Stonar, on the other hand, was in the Isle of Thanet, and transhipment would therefore be necessary in order to cross the harbour into Kent. Mr. H. Sharp says :—

"The Romans had a road from Canterbury which finished at Each End, where they had a landing place."

Now Each End was within the harbour, but on the Kent shore, and lay about one mile to the south of Richborough. That road to-day (sometimes called the Ash Road) continues

on to Sandwich. If this was so it will be clear that everything arriving at or leaving Stonar would have to be ferried across to or from the Kent side. Richborough at this time was silting up, and could no longer be used, and so Stonar, though most inconvenient, took its place, which shows conclusively that Sandwich was not available until about the time when Stonar was at its best.

THE EXTINCTION OF THE CHANNEL.

We have seen from Maps 1, 2 and 3 that continual changes had been going on in the physical construction of the Wantsum Channel until, in the course of time, it became extinct.

It remains to examine the cause, and to trace the process by which nature carried out her work of destruction, helped as it was in later years by man.

It is difficult to give an exact date when the channel ceased to be of any further use for commercial purposes, but in Hasted's *History of Kent* there is a passage which says :—

> " As late as the latter end of the fifteenth century, the Wantsum Channel continued navigable, not only for the lesser boats but for the greater barks, and merchant ships, which sailed backward and forward between this island and the continent."

In Leland's time the channel of the river Stour, owing to mills being built upon it, was not navigable above Fordwich ; but from that place, passing inside the Isle of Thanet through Sandwich, and so on to the sea, it was navigable for lighters employed in the conveyance of heavy merchandise. Somner says that *in* 1699 A.D. *boats and lighters were still carrying coals and stone from Sandwich to Canterbury.*

The northerly drift of beach material, referred to in the Saxon period, had been continuous in its silting operations on the Deal coast. When we last referred to Sandwich, it had become connected up with the Mainland (See Map 3), leaving only the distance between the southern end of the Stonar Beach, and the northern part of the sandbank that

Sandwich was built upon, as a passage for the waters to flow through. (See Map 3.)

In the course of time, this silting action began even to restrict the width of the channel as well as the inside of the harbour. An easterly wind was, of course, the most destructive, as it not only drove the silt into the harbour, but deposited the beach material on the seaward side of the sandbank, until it affected the mouth of the estuary by inclining it in a northerly direction. Mr. Geo. Dowker in *Coast Erosions* says :

" The present mouth of the Stour has extended northward 3,000 feet between 1819 and 1896 in the direction of Ramsgate harbour, and the older the map consulted, the further south is the mouth."

The result of all this was to place Sandwich further and further inland, both from the east and to the north until to-day that town is two miles due east from the sea, and four by the winding of the Stour to its mouth.

It is worth noting the peculiar course this river has had to take to enable it to empty its waters into the sea. Turning south near Ebbsfleet, it continues hugging the Stonar Beach shore as if trying to find a way through, but failing that, has had to keep on until the southern end is reached, round which it turns, and proceeds to travel north for about two and a half miles parallel with its former southerly course, but this time on the other side of the Stonar Beach, until it finds an outlet in Pegwell Bay.

At the other end of the Channel, that is the Northmouth, where the Reculver is situated, the same destruction went on, though not at the same rapid pace. The cliffs there, as far as Herne Bay, are composed of loam, with clay underneath. The rains percolate through the upper strata, causing landslides, which fall away seaward, and are carried off by the winds and currents.

Even to-day this work of disintegration continues, as can be seen from the Beacon Hill at Herne Bay right along the cliffs to the Northmouth, where at every high tide, the

sea is discoloured with the falling loam. Up to the time when the Northmouth was closed by two walls, this loam was removed by the sea into the Wantsum Channel, and deposited on its bed with ever recurring regularity. The decay of the cliffs, therefore, between Herne Bay and the Northmouth, during the long centuries past, has cast the loamy debris into the doomed Channel, and was partly the cause of its getting silted up. Furthermore, the existence of entrances on two different coasts occasioned the tides to ebb and flow through both entrances at much about the same time, thereby reducing the speed of the current, and so enabling the suspended matter more easily to settle.

The general meeting place of the two tides was at Sarre. There they encountered one another, one from the Northmouth and the other from Sandwich. Dr. Parks, referring to this, says :

" The two seas were distinct, and kept their tides so from one another. The one flowing from the north side of the Foreland and the other from the south, and each met the other at the low point of the highlands under Sarre, from whence they ebbed back again, each to its own sea."

In Lewis's *History of Thanet* the phenomenon of the tides is referred to as follows :—

" Great commotion was caused in the waters by the meeting of the two tides off Sarre ; one day the tide from the north being stronger than the one from the south, would force it back ; other days the reverse would happen."

It must also be remembered that there were four rivers, the two Stours, the Wantsum and the Glenade, emptying their waters into the sea. The effect of all this on a Channel which, at its best, was never very deep, was gradually to reduce its usefulness as a means of transport, until the day came when, at low tide, the only waters visible were those which were confined between the narrow banks of the rivers and an impassable marsh on either side.

The Deal coast entrance was the first to get silted up, so that the sea water at high tide kept within the limits of

the river banks, but as it continued to flow over the marshes through the Northmouth entrance for some distance past Sarre, it was decided to build a wall or dam across the narrowest part of the channel, and so prevent the waters getting any further. This dam is known to-day as the Sarre wall and, though now no longer used for its original purpose, the Canterbury-Thanet road runs over it, having a bridge to allow the Wantsum river to pass under.

Another dam built for the same purpose is that which is known as "Chamber's Wall." This runs from a little west of the village of Bartletts to the Thames, and then follows the line of the coast till it meets the cliffs that begin near Birchington. The effect of this wall was to bring under pasture that part of the Wantsum Channel which bent round to the east, from Bartletts as far as Hale, before turning north again to the sea.

We now find the Wantsum Channel confined in its area to a straight line from Sarre to Northmouth, the easterly bend from Bartletts to the village of Hale being cut off by the Chamber's Wall.

Last of all, at the latter end of the eighteenth century, the Northmouth was permanently closed up by the building of two walls, an inner and outer one, from the Reculver, until they met at Chamber's Wall about two miles away in the direction of Birchington.

This, then, is the story of the lost Wantsum Channel, which in its day, not only had its value as a commercial waterway, but also as the seat of the earliest historical events connected with the rise of a nation, whose extent, power and justice have far outstripped those of ancient Rome.